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**IDENTIFYING SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND PEDAGOGICAL
FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO MINORITY STUDENTS' LOW
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

By

Deborah C. Shoemaker

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Masters of Arts in Education Leadership
of
The Graduate School
at
Rowan University
April 14, 2005

Approved by

Professor

Date Approved May 17, 2005

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ABSTRACT

Deborah C. Shoemaker
IDENTIFYING SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND PEDAGOGICAL
FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO MINORITY STUDENTS' LOW
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

2004/2005

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The purpose of this study was to identify, evaluate, and develop strategies to eliminate barriers in the educational setting that negatively impact minority student's motivation to achieve academic success. Major aspects of the methodology plan included a self-guided survey with two open-ended questions. The sample size was approximately 106 elementary school students from Oak Valley Elementary School in Deptford, New Jersey. The data analysis method assessed students and parents beliefs as to the cause of poor academic motivation and performance in relation to the academic achievement gap. The survey responses revealed several ideas and suggestions that may be instrumental in improving students' overall motivation and attitude toward school.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take a moment to express my gratitude to all of those who gave invaluable support and assistance while writing my thesis. First, I would like to thank The Deptford Township Board of Education and Michael Adams, Principal of Oak Valley Elementary School, for allowing me to conduct the research. Thank you to the students, parents, and teachers who gave graciously of their time by assisting with administering, completing, and collecting surveys. Thank you to Ms. Claudia Buck for assistance with editing, Ms. Lee Henry and Mrs. Joann Jones for the countless hours they spent assisting me with the technology navigation, and Mrs. Karen Moritz for assisting with the students BMI calculations to determine the over weight and obesity rate.

Most importantly, I would like to especially thank my children, Rocky, Steph, and Seg, for being my pillar of strength, support, and encouragement during the difficult times. None of this would ever have been possibly without the love and support of my family to whom I am eternally grateful-Love you guys ☺

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Focus of the Study

Due to the disparity in minority and white academic achievement, as well as NCLB mandates, educators, administrators, and policymakers continue to search for answers to this pervasive problem that has plagued the American education system since the release of the 1992 report *A Nation at Risk*. One disturbing train of thought among some educators is that many minority students, for whatever reason, just are not motivated to learn, and therefore do not perform well on standardized tests. Unfortunately, this generic explanation for the achievement gap disparity has become an acceptable answer to this longstanding problem. Therefore, this study focused on the disparity in minority and white academic achievement from two points of reference: student motivation and ability grouping.

One goal of this study was to determine what factors students' and parents' believe contribute to minority students' poor motivation for school. This lack of motivation was evidenced by standardized test results and affects primarily African American (male) students. The study centered on three interrelated areas believed to contribute to the academic achievement gap: minority motivation from a pedagogical standpoint, the lack of cultural congruence between students and staff, and the overrepresentation of minority students, primarily male, in low track classes where students were grouped by like academic ability. Based upon current research the quality of instruction and level of

academic expectation in low-track classes is minimal at best, thereby contributing to low self-esteem, low academic motivation, and poor academic performance.

Since it is human nature to reject things that are of no interest to us or are unfamiliar, it is hypothesized that students, both Black and White, will reject education if the curriculum does not provide a realistic connection to their environment. As a result, educators perceive students' disconnect and disinterest in school as a lack of motivation when the issue may be one of a non-culturally congruent curriculum.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to evaluate social, cultural, and pedagogical barriers that may contribute to minority students' lack of motivation to excel in academia, and to identify and eliminate those factors, where possible, as they may be key factors in the disparity in academic achievement between minority and white students. Another purpose of this study was to inform educators and policy makers of various causative factors that lead to low academic motivation in order to bridge the cultural gap of understanding, thus promoting academic excellence for all students, regardless of their cultural background.

The criteria used to gather this information was a 16 question survey, 8 multiple-choice and 8 open-ended. The open-ended questions provided the participants with an opportunity to offer personal insight that may be pertinent to identifying some of the culprits that stifle academic success.

This project focused on improving students' vision of learning through qualitative research, collaboration, and cultural understanding in an attempt to engage all students in a shared vision of learning. In turn, students' academic performance and success

improved through recognizing, identifying, and eliminating negative barriers that stifle their ability to learn.

As a result of this study, there were several areas of improvement that had a positive impact on the academic success of students' due to their ability to voice their concerns about issues they deem important to their academic success. One area of improvement was increased parental involvement such as assisting their son/daughter with completing an education-based survey. This also afforded students and parents an opportunity to become an active voice for educational improvement through collaboration with teachers and administrators.

The second area of improvement was the promotion of cultural diversity from a pedagogical standpoint whereby teachers received in-service training on the learning styles of cultures different from their own. This training also provided teachers with insight on various cultural cues and behaviors that helped to reduce the number of administrative referrals for normal "cultural behavior" that, until now, was unfamiliar to many educators.

The third area of improvement was in teacher awareness in terms of learning styles. By informing educators of the various styles of learning they were able to modify their teaching methodology to ensure that students achieve heightened academic success.

Definitions

Multiculturalism: Teaching the history and value of all cultures in society by incorporating it into the curriculum.

Eurocentric Curriculum: A curriculum that primarily teaches European history, culture, and values.

Afrocentric Curriculum: A curriculum that teaches African history, culture, and values.

Cultural Congruence: Teachers who share the same cultural/ethnic background as some of their students and therefore fit in with and understand specific cultural behaviors.

Cultural Likeness: Individuals who share the same cultural background, beliefs, and practices.

Limitations of the Study

The age of the participants and the sensitivity of the topic posed several limitations. This study was limited to students between the ages of 7 and 12 and their parent(s) or guardian. Because students at this age are becoming more aware of various social issues concerning different cultural or ethnic groups, great care was taken to ensure no student suffered emotional harm as a result of participating in this survey.

The second limitation was the possibility of not receiving enough completed surveys to substantiate the study. The last limitation of the study was the possibility that students did not understand certain survey questions and therefore would answer them incorrectly or not at all.

Setting of the Study

Compliments of information gathered from the publication *Under Four Flags, Old Gloucester County 1686-1964: A History of Gloucester County N.J., 1965*, Deptford became one of four original townships in Gloucester County and was named after a small town in Kentshire, England, previously known as Bethlehem. In 1623, Deptford's early Dutch settlers were under the leadership of Cornelius Jacobs Mey, and the melting pot of nationalities/cultures progressively became Americanized to form more Metropolitan

communities. As residents grew less Puritanical, with a heightened sense of freedom the communities were more unified, (Simpson, 1965).

The most historic event in Deptford occurred in 1793 when a Frenchman by the name of Jean Pierre Blanchard, carrying a letter from George Washington, landed a balloon in the area of what is currently known as the RCA Plant and Deptford Mall. This was said to be America's first air mail delivery.

With a population of 7,300 by 1950, Deptford's growth rate has climbed to a cultural mix of 26,763 according to the N.J. Public Sector, 5th Edition, 2003. Of the total population, the ethnic breakdown is 83.44% Caucasian (White), 12.38% African American (Black), 2.86% Hispanic/Latino, 1.53% Asian, 1.41% Multi-racial, .99% Other, and 0.21% Native American. The rapid population growth was primarily due to a continuous influx of families into the township because of the availability of land, as well as cheaper housing costs. As a result, there are 10,013 households in Deptford with an average family size of 3.12, also based on the 2003 Census. According to the *Community Analysis for Deptford Public Library*, Deptford was once known as a very prominent area for pig farming and now offers various types of industry with the most well known being the Deptford Mall, which opened its doors in 1975.

Socially, one important event that takes place every May is known throughout the community as "Deptford Day". This unity building event is a day of entertainment that offers a parade, fireworks, and various games and activities that is open to all residents of the community, as well as their family and friends. Deptford Day began in 1974 when Mayor Ron Marks, along with several council members, presented the idea to Deptford Jaycees and has been carried out every year since its inception.

From an educational standpoint, Deptford Township School District is committed to educating its youth as it operates under a longstanding principle that “School and Community are partners in the educational progress” (2002-2003 New Jersey School Report Card). To serve the diverse needs of its students, Deptford has an early childhood center, six elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Together they provide a comprehensive education for over 4,100 students. Deptford is also the third largest educational system in Gloucester County. Also located in Deptford Township is the local Gloucester County College, which began offering its services in 1968 in a remodeled farmhouse and barn. Based on information obtained from the Community Analysis for Deptford Public Library the college moved to the new campus in 1970 and is currently referred to as GCC.

In addition to offering nine schools and one community college, Deptford also has a local library, Johnson Memorial Library, which offers various programs and activities for members of the community.

Of the nine public schools in Deptford, Oak Valley Elementary School, which has been an integral part of the community for over 45 years, is where the study took place. Oak Valley Elementary has also undergone several recent improvements. Built in 1955 and located within the suburban community of Deptford, Oak Valley Elementary School serves approximately 350 students in grades 2 thru 6. The rich cultural mix within the community and the age at which students begin to dislike school played an integral role in Oak Valley Elementary School being the chosen site and population for the study.

According to Kunjufu (1989), by the time students reach second grade they have begun to dislike school for various reasons. Additionally, by the time these students reach

the third grade they have become victims of what Kunjufu calls “Third Grade Syndrome”. This is the time period when Black students achievement rate begins to spiral downward due to the classroom environment transforming from a socially interactive environment to a less socially interactive and highly competitive environment. This in turn often leads to “Fourth Grade Failure Syndrome” where students’ poor transition from the primary to the intermediate grade level fosters poor academic performance.

To combat Fourth Grade Failure Syndrome, it is imperative to collaborate with families early and often in a student’s educational career in order to identify the signs of Third Grade Failure Syndrome, thus preventing or reducing the likelihood that it progresses to a stage where students completely shut down and succumb to academic failure.

Additionally, this study focused on identifying key factors that negatively affect students’ motivation for school. Therefore, student and parent input was encouraged throughout the survey regarding issues they believed to contribute to students’ poor motivation or academic performance.

Significance of the Study

Because of the widening gap between minority and white academic achievement, as well as the disproportionate distribution of racial and ethnic minorities in low track classes or special education classes, it is imperative to determine if and how this affects minority students’ academic success, and to what degree. Also, since student performance and attitude toward school seems to progressively decline as grade in school increases, it is equally important to identify the stage at which minority students begin to lose interest in school. Although this is the basis for further study, it is paramount to

identify when academic performance and attitude towards school begins to decline so parents, teachers, and administrators can take steps to minimize or eliminate this academic nosedive.

Relationship of the study to the ISLLC standards

In 1996, the Council of Chief State School Officers devised a set of standards by which administrators would base their performance or service to students. These standards are referred to as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium, or ISLLC Standards. Based on the focal point of the study, there were several ISLLC standards relevant to the study.

ISLLC Standard #1 states that an educational leader is one who facilitates the development, articulation, and implementation of a shared vision of learning that is supported by the entire school community. Standard 1.c.1 is important to the study because it strives to seek community support and participation in order to help identify and eliminate specific factors that may be detrimental to students' academic success.

ISLLC standard 1 is also relevant to the study because it seeks to promote student success through culturally relevant collaboration, pedagogical planning, and implementation. Although the primary stakeholders in this study were students and parents, future plans will include an assessment of teachers and administrators beliefs as to the cause for low motivation and academic achievement.

ISLLC Standard 2 was also represented in the study because it focused on the importance of adopting a curriculum that promotes diversity and highlights the positive contributions of all cultures, especially those cultures that are represented within the school. Winter Pettis-Renwick expressed this view quite well in her anthology that

offered insight into the value of re-centering the canon to focus on contributions of all peoples. Darling-Hammond (2002) contends that students learn best in an environment that is supportive and respectful of their identities. Therefore, ISLLC Standard 2.b.4. is relevant to the study because it stressed the importance of adopting a curriculum that promotes diversity and gives equal value to the contributions made by all cultures. These diverse contributions are the threads woven through America that bind it into a great country. Therefore, it is important to respect, recognize, and honor all its contributors by implementing a k-12 multicultural curriculum.

ISLLC Standard 4 promotes student success through collaborating with families and the community regarding diverse interests and needs. The elementary and middle school survey provided a platform by which participants could voice their opinions or concerns in an attempt to bring about positive change. Standard 4.a.2. is relevant to the study because it stressed the need for educators, administrators, and policymakers to learn and better understand the dynamics of diversity in order to bridge cultural gaps in the educational setting. This was achieved by improving cultural awareness within the school community in order to improve academic performance.

Organization of the Study

This study was organized into five chapters. Chapter 1, Introduction, provided general information about the study and gave details about the primary objectives. It also listed various definitions of uncommon or unfamiliar terms used throughout the study and explained the significance of the study as it relates to the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards.

Chapter 2, Review of The Literature, involved choosing appropriate research material from various sources, interpreting the information noting the relationship to the research problem, and compiling or interpreting the results. The purpose of the literature review was to compare information about the topic, and to determine its relationship to the research problem. Various sources were used to support the claim for the need of a more culture-friendly curriculum in order to improve students' attitude toward school.

Recent research supports the claim that cultural congruence not only improves students' motivation to learn when there is a connection between their lives and the curriculum, but it also improves teachers' ability to read and understand various cultural factors relevant to students differences in learning style.

Chapter 3, Design of The Study, explained the method used to gather information from two sub-groups: elementary school students' and parents who assisted their child (ren) with completing the survey. The sample subjects included male and female participants from different cultural backgrounds such as African-American (Black), Caucasian (White), Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and Other, which include students of mixed race.

The elementary survey consisted of 8 multiple choice and 8 open-ended questions. The data was then coded and each response was analyzed to determine the validity of the question as it related to the research problem. The survey offered valuable insight relating to specific student and parent issues or concerns relevant to motivation and academic performance. This increased the validity of the study since all groups were encouraged to share their personal thoughts by answering the open-ended questions.

Evidence from this study offered meaningful suggestions for improving or maintaining students' level of motivation for academia. These suggestions ranged from more social time, less extensive homework, and more hands-on, cooperative learning opportunities to having teachers present their subject matter with more enthusiasm.

Chapter 4, Findings of The Study, presented the results of the survey and offered suggestions for improving students' motivation and school performance. The student and parent feedback to the open-ended questions also served as a basis for improving collaboration and understanding between students and teachers.

Chapter 5, Conclusion, Implications, and Further Study, summarized the findings and provided information regarding further exploration of the research topic. Changes to the organization were the result of the student and parent feedback on the survey. After sharing this information with the principal of Oak Valley Elementary School, teachers were encouraged to incorporate more hands-on, group assignment teaching methods rather than individual assignments to improve student motivation and promote academic success. This also offered minority and non-minority students alike an opportunity to communicate more with their peers in a cooperative learning environment that is a more academically conducive to learning regardless of a student's race, culture, or ethnic background.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Because of the widening gap between black and white academic achievement, in addition to the vast over-representation of racial and ethnic minorities in low track classes or special education tracks, this study identified factors that contribute to students' lack of academic motivation, which in turn has a negative impact on their academic achievement. Although there are many factors that contribute to the achievement gap disparity, there are two main culprits of low academic achievement. First is the lack of motivation for school, and the second is the disproportionate placement of ethnic and racial minority students in low track classes or special education classes. Therefore, this study focused on these two factors in an attempt to ascertain what could be done to improve students' motivation for school, thus decreasing or eliminating the achievement gap.

The academic achievement gap disparity has not only served as a catalyst for No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandate, it has also left educators and administrators searching for answers to this pervasive problem. Although the common train of thought is that African American students simply are not motivated to learn, some researchers contend otherwise. Unfortunately, this generic explanation for the achievement gap disparity has spanned several generations and has now become an acceptable answer. Conversely, Darling-Hammond, French, and Garcia-Lopez (2002) suggest that when students feel alienated in a classroom they will not be motivated, productive learners because attention is not on intellectual queries, it is on the exclusionary social structure. They also contend that avoiding assumptions about "dominant" and "subordinate"

cultures with an eye on issues of equality will eliminate negative cultural assumptions and improve motivation. As a result, this study focused on two areas believed to be the common denominator for the achievement gap disparity: Minority motivation and ability grouping. Furthermore, Hale (2001) contends that grouping students based on their ability is not that essential, especially if it affects the self-esteem of half of the students in the class.

In terms of minority motivation, Jawanza Kunjufu (1989), educational consultant, points out several contributing factors affecting minority males' motivation or failure to achieve academically. Some of these factors included a decline in parental involvement, an increase in cultural peer pressure, low teacher expectation, a lack of African American male teachers, a lack of understanding of cultural differences in learning styles, and a decline in nurturing by educators to name a few. Kunjufu (1989) goes on to describe how many minority students enter kindergarten as highly motivated, eager, and successful learners who, by the time they reach third grade, begin to show a decline in their academic performance. Consequently, with each year they spend in school their motivation and academic performance continues to spiral downward. These students are the ones who now participate less, if at all, and their desire to learn is now replaced by the desire to ride bikes, play with trucks, play football or basketball, play video games, or simply to just hang out with their friends.

Since the disparity in academic achievement is a perplexing and delicate issue, the problem was addressed from a psychological standpoint. Kunjufu (1989) explains the decline of minority motivation as Third Grade Syndrome where the classroom environment has been transformed from a nurturing, socially interactive learning

environment to a more competitive, individualistic, minimally socially interactive learning environment. This marks the beginning of academic decline. At this critical developmental stage, docile conformist behavior is not only expected, it is rewarded. In contrast, social interaction and questioning is stifled and punishable for those who do not conform to the expected cultural behavior of the classroom. Consequently, this type of classroom environment is not conducive to many African American (male) students' learning styles because they are high-energy hands-on learners.

From a pedagogical standpoint, African American students' perceived lack of motivation may be attributed to the lack of understanding and acceptance of cultural differences in learning styles. For example, many African American students are right-brain learners. Basically, right-brain learners are very musical, highly creative, and learn better in environments that offer hands-on, cooperative learning activities. Right-brain learners are also very intuitive and prefer to see and understand the "whole picture" before they buy into an educational concept (Kunjufu, 1989). Therefore, a one-size-fits-all teaching approach does not promote academic success because it fails to accommodate students who learn differently from the way they are being taught. This could be a key factor in improving students' academic performance since the teaching methodology must first quench students' educational thirst. The scientific basis for understanding right and left-brain learning no doubt plays a key role in improving student motivation and academic achievement (Kunjufu, 1989).

Left-brain learners, on the other hand, are time-oriented, logical, sequential learners who work best when the material is presented in a well organized, logical, and progressive manner. They are also methodical learners who prefer a learning environment

where the information is broken down into a series of small structured steps. Unfortunately, any student whose style of learning is different from the teacher's style of learning or teaching may present as an unmotivated learner and, consequently, be treated as such. This is one example of how normal cultural behavior, as it relates to teachers' understanding of cultural cues and learning styles, can be perceived as rude, uncooperative, and defiant, which in turn leads to low level tracking or special education referral and placement. Unless educators receive in-service training to become more familiar with various cultural cues and learning styles, and implement what is learned, these unrecognized differences will continue to undermine the academic success of minority students, thereby fostering low motivation for academic success fueling the fire of disparity in academic achievement (Williams, 1996).

Another factor believed to contribute to minority students' low motivation is the absence of a culturally relevant curriculum. Many social studies classes do not teach the positive contributions Africans made to American civilization prior to 1619. Instead, they are taught their history in America begins with slavery. Research done by Ivan Van Sertima (1976) revealed that Africans were present on the continent of America 900-600 B.C., and came not as conquerors or slaves, but as merchants. If African history were taught as a part of American history, this would have a profoundly positive effect on the psyche of African American children in terms of heightened self-esteem and cultural respect.

The lack of a culturally relevant curriculum throughout African American students' educational career fosters low cultural self-worth and causes them to devalue history, including their own. Consequently, this disassociation with various aspects of the

curriculum that students neither buy into nor feel a part of further contributes to low motivation and educational stagnation, as evidenced by poor academic achievement.

The intent of this study was not to imply that minority students' poor motivation for school is solely the result of past historical and societal practices. However, it is a contributing factor since decades of unjust policies and inequitable practices concerning schooling of minority children has had negative educational repercussions on past and present generations. Kunjufu (1989) offers some insight into why minority students appear to be less motivated academically. Some of these causes are the lack of parental involvement, negative cultural peer pressure where students are disassociated from the group and accused of trying to "act white" for performing well in school, living in an environment where they risk being assaulted or murdered in their daily quest to attend school, and hopelessness, to name a few. The above facts are pointed out simply to shed some light on the potential damage to minority students' psyche as a result of a curriculum that omits the positive historical contributions made by various cultures.

Another societal ill affecting minority student's motivation and academic success is ability grouping, commonly referred to as tracking. As Jeannie Oakes (1985) points out, "Seen as products of disorganized and deteriorating homes and family structures, poor and minority children have been thought of as unmotivated, noncompetitive, and culturally disadvantaged" (p. 4). If this is the attitude of some educators, it will manifest as poor motivation and poor academic performance, which ultimately leads to low-level tracking or ability grouping.

Because of the widening gap between Black and White academic achievement and the disproportionate distribution of racial and ethnic minorities in low track classes or special

education tracks, there is a nationwide movement to eliminate the process of tracking, replacing it with inclusion, in an attempt to improve students' academic success.

Although some progress was made during the 1980's that waned tracking, some researcher's believe that this progress has been revived in an attempt to re-segregate the nation's schools, thereby widening the achievement gap once again and setting minority students on an irreversible path to failure. Historically, the process of tracking or ability grouping, which in essence is a sorting of students by race, class, or ethnicity, was once considered an "ordinary" way to conduct schooling, thus emerging as a solution to specific social and educational problems at that particular time in history (Oakes, 1985). Stifling the public school system was the influx of immigrants and minorities into American schools. This gave rise to the perceived need to build a cohesive nation through common learning in American schools, thereby preserving the dominant culture by eliminating minorities and immigrants' "depraved" lifestyle and cultural practices (Oakes, 1985).

Past belief systems relative to theories of human society gave rise to Darwinism, which is the presumption that certain groups of people, primarily ethnic minorities and the poor, were on the lower rung of the social and moral development ladder because they were deemed "less fit" and at an inferior evolutionary stage as compared to Anglo-Protestants. As a result, what emerged is the current practice of tracking or ability grouping, which retards the academic progress of poor and minority students, fosters low self-esteem, promotes misbehavior and increased dropout rate, lowers aspirations, and separates students along socioeconomic lines (Oakes, 1985). She also highlights the negative emotional impact on students in low-level tracks by contending that they have

the most negative academic view of themselves and the lowest expectations for their educational future.

Although Darwinism provided the “scientific” basis for placing ethnic minorities and the poor on the bottom of the social strata (Oakes, 1985), a multicultural curriculum would serve as the nexus for positive change to promote academic success for minority students. This would not only enlighten American’s school children about the positive contributions made by all cultures, it would also begin to address negative historical blemishes that continue to wreak havoc on the minds of minority students. Akbar (1996) also contends that some of the social ills plaguing African Americans today are the result of past inhumane conditions and practices. He goes on to say that the resulting conditions are a kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome on the collective minds of African Americans. From an educational standpoint, this is perhaps the common denominator in minority students’ low motivation for school, perceived or otherwise.

There are two opposing beliefs to tracking or ability grouping. Although small in number, one group suggests that grouping students by like ability provides increased educational opportunity and fosters motivation and excitement about learning. The other group detests tracking or ability grouping, suggesting that it provides unequal educational opportunities for poor and minority students, as well as fosters other social or emotional effects that limit academic achievement (Oakes, 1985).

Karen Agne (1999), in an article on New Zealand’s education system, found that New Zealand groups its students by like ability, suggesting that students will advance as they are developmentally able. Additionally, New Zealand’s classes are also composed predominately of students of mixed ages. Hence, there is evidence of the benefits of

tracking since their students out ranked U.S. students in science and math. New Zealand ranked sixth in science and the U.S. sixteenth, eighth in math and the U.S. nineteenth. Agne (1999) also suggests it is not tracking itself that affect U.S. students' ability to achieve, but rather how we track. Some researchers have questioned why ability grouping or tracking is still being practiced since many of them concur that it contributes to the achievement gap disparity by limiting educational opportunity based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Tom Loveless (1999) contends that to eliminate tracking or ability grouping will condemn all students to mediocrity and all teachers to an impossible task. He also goes on to say that the move toward de-tracking and inclusion is not to improve education or to improve the achievement gap rather it is being advanced for social and political reasons.

Harriet Romo (1998), on the other hand, has found that the process of grouping students by ability based on teacher or counselor recommendations, as well as standardized test scores, not only has a negative impact on the teaching profession in terms of public trust, but also diminishes minority parents trust in the school system as well.

Researchers such as Jeannie Oakes (1985) and John Goodlad (1984) point out that tracking does not work; it only insures that those in the lowest tract will never catch up with those in the highest tract. Kunjufu (1989) suggests that this may have been the original intention. Therefore, since school reform is the current "buzz" topic, now might be a good time for policymakers to rid the educational community of the questionable practice of tracking or ability grouping.

Although not supported by current research, many educators believe students learn better when placed in groups with other students of like ability. Based on past beliefs and cultural stereotyping, students were identified as high or low achievers according to their capabilities through hierarchical groupings (Romo, 1998). Thus, teacher expectation and placement was based on the social status of students. From an academic standpoint, the negative impact of tracking or ability grouping is highly evident in the disparity between poor, minority, and white standardized test scores. Researchers have also found that “tracking stifles academic success limiting students’ intellectual or academic challenges by offering nothing more than rote drills on basic skills” (Burnett, 1995).

By “identifying” ethnic or cultural minorities early in their academic career, usually by the 8th day of kindergarten (Kunjufu, 1989) ensures a negative psychological impact on students, and makes them less motivated to learn and more predestined to failure. This practice, tracking, condemns low-track students to impoverished educational setting and a less productive life as an adult (Oakes, 1995). Oakes also concurs that tracking fosters lowered self-esteem, further exacerbated by negative cultural perceptions.

As a result of academic condemnation and the lack of cultural relevance, low-track students not only lack the basic skills necessary to succeed in high school and pursue a college tract, they may, in turn, become a behavior problem to make up for their academic deficit. Consequently, these students, who are primarily African American Males were often referred to special education tracts where they are likely to remain.

One major problem with tracking (ability grouping), as pointed out by Jawanza Kunjufu (1989) in his book entitled *Critical Issues In Educating African American Youth*, is that the majority of special education referrals are made for African American males

(80 %) and are made by a small percentage of teachers (20%) who are usually Caucasian females (Kunjufu, 1989).

Adding to the complexity of academic achievement is the use of standardized tests and I.Q. tests which many researchers believe are not only culturally bias, but fail to measure students' true academic ability. As a result, students' performance on these tests also determines their class placement, which is usually in remedial or low-track classes. This low track placement not only affects students' motivation to achieve, but also fosters failure as a result of them accepting their predetermined low academic expectations and placement. This fosters hopelessness within students as they accept that they will ever be placed in a "normal" educational setting where success is not only expected, but is also nurtured.

Although there are other family, community, and societal factors that contribute to minority students' motivation for academic achievement, tracking, or ability grouping is the primary culprit in the failed attempts to reverse the achievement gap. Additionally, The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) recommends eliminating the tracking or ability grouping practice, referring to it as one of the most divisive and damaging school practices in existence. Slavin (1993) also re-asserts that if the effects of ability grouping on student achievement are zero, then there is little reason to maintain the practice.

Although the scale was tipped overwhelmingly in favor of moving away from the system of tracking, replacing it with inclusion, there are still some proponents who argue that tracking is a necessary evil which allows schools to meet the varying needs of its students by providing extra attention and a slower pace to students who require it. They

also assert that tracking or ability grouping affords high achieving students the fast-paced, more demanding lessons they require in order to be challenged academically. Unfortunately, as evidenced by the types of students being tracked, as well as standardized test scores, tracking has caused more harm than good.

Having addressed various factors negatively affecting minority students' academic achievement such as limited parental involvement, poor motivation due to a lack of cultural congruence within the curriculum, low teacher expectation, and overrepresentation of minority (male) students in special education tracts or low-track classes, the basis of this study was to identify issues that have become barriers in minority students' academic achievement. Once identified, the findings of the study were shared with the principal of Oak Valley Elementary School in hopes of improving all students' academic success by bridging the cultural-curricular gap to promote academic success.

Chapter 3

Design of the Study

Description of Research Design

Major aspects of the methodology plan consisted of a 16 question survey, 8 multiple choice and 8 open-ended. There were approximately 106 student and parent participants. Prior to issuing the survey, an informational letter was mailed to all parents/guardians of Oak Valley Elementary School students explaining the details of the study and its purpose. Following the informational letter was a copy of the survey and a permission slip that was signed by the parent(s) prior to the student completing the voluntary survey. Upon completion, the surveys were returned to the students' homeroom teacher and forwarded to the Rowan Intern. A letter of appreciation was submitted to the Oak Valley Elementary School and the participants, thanking them for their support and efforts in making this study a success.

Focus of Research Instruments

The research instrument used for this study was a self-guided survey. The two open-ended questions were designed to elicit individual responses concerning students' and parents' perception as to possible causes for poor academic motivation and low academic achievement. It was determined that a survey would be the most age appropriate method for gathering data from elementary school participants.

Sample And Sampling Technique

The sample subjects for this study consisted of 106 students from Oak Valley Elementary School in Deptford, New Jersey. The participants ranged from 2nd through 6th grade and included male and female, regular education and special education students.

Also, parents who assisted their child with completing the survey played an equally important role in the success of the survey.

From a cultural standpoint, the participants were from African American, Caucasian, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian backgrounds. Economically, the participants ranged from lower middle class to upper middle class backgrounds.

Since it has been determined that many students begin to lose interest in school by the second grade, the target audience was elementary age students. The purpose of choosing 7 to 12 year olds was to identify and eliminate negative factors that may foster poor motivation and academic success early in a child's educational career in an attempt to improve their motivation to achieve academic success, thereby improving the disparity in academic achievement.

The sampling technique used for this study was a convenience sample. Due to the age of the participants, it was determined that a convenience sample would be the most effective method of gathering a sufficient amount of data to validate the study.

Data Collection Approach

The data collection approach used for this study was a small scale exploratory survey. With the exception of the students who received assistance from their parents, the survey questionnaire was self-administered. The focus of the research approach was to assess variables in students/parents thought patterns in relation to what they believe to be the cause for poor academic performance in school.

Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis plan began with the focus on two key issues: student motivation and academic achievement. Once the surveys were collected they were grouped according to

grade level and placed in subcategories according to each question. Next, the responses were analyzed and coded based on like patterns of ideas or beliefs, noting the frequency of particular responses deemed relevant to the student/parent.

Chapter 4

Presentation of Research Findings

Findings

The focus of the study was to identify factors in the educational setting that cause minority students to lack motivation to achieve academic success. The ethnic breakdown of the survey respondents was 87 Caucasian (82%), eight African American (8%), multi-racial (6%), and five Hispanic (5%). Due to a low minority response rate the study was inconclusive. However, some of the responses to the survey proved beneficial in identifying key issues that contribute to students decline in motivation for school and academic performance. Word Table 1 shows participants responses to the open-ended survey questions designed to assess their past and present attitudes about school. The number in parenthesis represents the most common response and the frequency.

Table 1

Assessment of Participant's General Attitude Toward School.

Question #	Response
1. What students like most about school.	Specials-gym/recess, art and music (60) Math (20) The teacher (12)
2. What students like least about school.	Homework (17) Math (12) Lunch (6)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Question #	Response
3. What students like least about school.	Homework (17) Math (12) Lunch (6)
4. What made school fun in kindergarten.	Serendipity time (42) The teacher (10) Being with friends (7)
5. What currently makes school fun.	Specials such as gym/recess, art, music (28) Being with friends (18) Nice teachers who are cool (18)
6. Reasons why students say school is no longer fun.	No response or left blank (79) The work is getting harder (10) Too much work (4)
7. The grade at which students say they began to lose interest in school.	2 nd grade (8) 3 rd grade (6) 5 th grade (6)
8. Three things students say teachers can do to make school fun.	More learning games/fun activities (35) Give less homework (12) Be nice and funny (7)
16. Five things students say teachers can do to help them improve their academic performance.	Play games to help students learn (34) Give extra help when needed (15) More one-on-one with teacher (14) Be nice (11) More hands-on group work (8)

Note. The number in parenthesis represents the frequency of responses.

Although it was revealed that some student's loss of motivation for school began by the 2nd grade, it was also revealed that the three things students most enjoyed about school were specials (gym/recess, art, and music), math, and their teacher. Additionally, students frequently expressed the importance of teachers making learning fun by using learning games to teach various concepts and providing more opportunities to do group work. Hence, it was determined that it may be educationally prudent to provide students with more hands-on learning activities and projects that allows some degree of movement, especially for those students with high energy levels, in order to maintain or improve students motivation for academia.

Although not as frequent, there were other potentially useful suggestions for improving students' academic performance, which will be revisited at a later date. However, word table 2 lists the results of survey questions designed to assess students' attitude and performance in the areas of classwork and homework, which also plays a vital role in their academic success.

Table 2

Analysis of Class Work and Homework Performance

Survey Question	Results
8. How do you feel about doing homework?	53% enjoy doing homework
9. How often do you complete homework?	92% said all/most of the time
10. What class/subject do you like most?	25% like math, 23% favor specials, 16% enjoy reading
11. How often do you complete classwork?	95% said all/most of the time
12. How much time do you spend studying?	83% said 1 hour or less each night?

Table 2 (Continued)

Survey question	Results
13. How much time do you spend each night reading aloud?	55% said between 5 to 30 minutes
14. How much time do you spend watching TV or playing video games daily?	81% said between 1 to 3 hours
15. How much time do you spend on the computer each day (not for school)?	32% answered 15 minutes to 3 hours

Note: Table 2 represents the percentage rate for completing assignments.

The survey revealed that 53% of students enjoyed doing classwork and homework because they realize it helps them to get a good grade and 92 % complete their work all or most of the time. It was also determined that while 83% of students spend 1 hour or less studying or doing homework, 81% spend between 15 minutes and 3 hours watching TV or playing video games. Consequently, it can be postulated that if students applied their daily TV/video game time to academic work it could possibly improve academic performance.

Analysis

Upon analyzing the results of the survey dealing with students attitude towards school and their performance, it was determined that perhaps the constant rapid visual stimulation from watching TV and playing video games could be the common denominator in students desire to play more learning games in order to quench their academic thirst. Since students have been conditioned to be entertained they may not respond favorably to traditional styles of teaching.

Although there was not enough data from a diverse sample population to identify causative factors that inhibit minority students' academic success, the survey offered useful suggestions that may prove beneficial in improving the educational outcome for all students. Based on participants' beliefs as to what they would like teachers to do to maintain or improve their academic motivation and performance, the most common responses were to make learning fun by playing educational or learning games, receiving rewards for doing well, more one-on-one time with the teacher, receiving extra help during recess, doing more experiments in science and math to make learning interesting and less boring, and more hands-on work with a partner or in groups.

The relationship or connection among belief patterns was determined to be key factors in developing and maintaining students' motivation to achieve academic success. Additionally, participant responses to specific questions were presented to show their concern or feelings about particular issues relevant to maintaining or improving student motivation. Responses gathered from the open-ended questions also offered suggestions for maintaining or improving students' academic performance. The findings were forwarded to the Oak Valley Elementary School principal.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Conclusion

The focal point of the study was to identify barriers that impede the academic success of minority students. However, of the 106 participants who completed the survey only 18% were minority while the remaining 82% were Caucasian. The minority population included 8 African American, 6 multi-racial, and 5 Hispanic. Although the number of minority participants did not substantiate the research problem, there were several pedagogical and classroom suggestions that surfaced as a result of this research that could lead to an improvement in students' motivation for school and ultimately, their academic performance. Some of these suggestions were: to play more educational games to help make learning fun, to have more free time or time to socialize with friends, to have teachers that are nice and humorous, to have less homework, to do more experiments or hands-on learning activities, to receive more one-on-one assistance from the teacher, and to give students rewards for doing well. Some students also pointed out the importance of parental involvement in order to facilitate their academic success.

In conclusion, the cause for minority student's low motivation and academic performance could not be determined because there was not enough significant data from minority students and parents to determine the cause. However, based on the assessment of students general attitude about school, it was concluded that they generally enjoyed school, but required more peer interaction within the classroom to maintain or improve their motivation for school. They also requested more time to socialize with friends, perhaps in cooperative learning-groups, to facilitate continued academic improvement.

Also, the results of the performance analysis revealed that the majority of students enjoy school and enjoy the academic challenges of school. However, they began to lose interest in school if the material was presented in a less enthusiastic, less stimulating manner.

Also, when the quantity and difficulty of the work reached overwhelming proportions, student interest began to decline.

Implications

This study raised students, parents, and teachers' awareness of the benefits of a culturally relevant curriculum and how it improves minority students' academic motivation and achievement. This study also revealed the importance of differentiated instruction in order to meet the motivational needs of students based on their diverse style of learning. The incorporation of more diverse activities and culture into the lesson may revive the students' appetite for learning.

It is also safe to imply that student's interest and motivation for school was maintained or improved when various teaching methods were employed in order to capture the attention of the diverse student population.

An important factor in maintaining or improving academic performance was providing students with structured "free time" through structured enrichment. When students began to feel overwhelmed with the amount of work or difficulty of the assignment they would provide with meaningful free time to review unclear concepts about a lesson, to build upon previously taught concepts, or to supplement previous lessons. This in turn reinforced the objectives while also providing students with a brief intermission from rigor.

Leadership Growth

ISLLC Standard 1 promotes student success by facilitating the development of a shared vision of learning that unifies the school community. One goal of this study was to promote academic success by giving students and parents' ownership in the decision-making process in order to improve students' academic motivation. Another goal of the study was to facilitate collaboration between students, parents, and teachers to improve overall academic performance.

From a professional standpoint, this study revealed several areas of personal growth. First, ISLLC Standard 6 promotes the success of all students by understanding and responding to the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context. Therefore, it made the intern more sensitive to the diverse cultural and social needs of students, especially those who were not fluent in the English language. Also, in reference to ISLLC Standard 4, administrators must promote student success by collaborating with families and community members based on the diverse needs and interests of the community. This standard was obtained when the intern became more tolerant and understanding of those students not fitting the expected educational or behavioral norm. For example, students were given repeated opportunities to re-do low grade assignments to facilitate success or to correct misbehavior by displaying the appropriate behavior as positive reinforcement.

As a result of some of the survey responses, to promote fairness and equity, the grading criteria was modified in order to provide students without access to basic computer technology an equal opportunity to maintain or achieve academic success. ISLLC Standard 5, which promotes student success by acting with integrity and fairness,

was also involved when allowing students the choice of typing or hand writing their assignments, which also provided them the opportunity to learn and have success.

From a leadership perspective, this study heightened the intern's motivation to include students, parents, and staff in the education continuum through collaborative efforts to maintain or improve students' desire to achieve academic success through life-long learning.

Organizational Change

The results of the study changed the organization in two ways. First, it further opened the lines of communication between students, parents, and teachers to work collectively to ensure students' academic success. Second, it afforded teachers with student centered suggestions to improve or maintain student motivation toward academic achievement.

Further Study

Due to the low number of minority participants (18%) who completed the survey, the cause of minority students' low academic motivation and performance could not be determined. Therefore, further study is needed which would limit the survey only to the minority population in an attempt to get a higher return rate and more accurate information as to why some minority students have difficulty being academically successful. This will also elicit responses based on culturally relevant needs or concerns in order to better identify and address these barriers that determine a students' academic success or failure. Furthermore, this information will be beneficial when correcting or eliminating pedagogical roadblocks, which will help lessen the gap in academic achievement.

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Appendix A
Elementary Survey

Elementary Survey

1. What do you like most about school?
2. What do you like least about school?
3. When you were in kindergarten what made school fun?
4. If you still consider school to be fun and/enjoyable, explain what makes it fun.
5. If school is no longer considered fun for you, please explain why.
6. If you answered number 5, place a check in the box below that represents the grade you were in when school was no longer fun for you. Otherwise skip this question and go on to number 7.
 - a) ☐ 2nd grade
 - b) ☐ 3rd grade
 - c) ☐ 4th grade
 - d) ☐ 5th grade
 - e) ☐ 6th grade
7. What three things can teachers or parents do to continue to make school/learning fun?
8. What are your feelings about completing homework assignments? *(Place a check in each box that best describes your answer)*
 - a) ☐ I complete my homework because I enjoy it and it helps me learn.
 - b) ☐ I complete my homework because my parents make me.
 - c) ☐ I complete my homework because it helps me to get a good grade.
 - d) ☐ I do not like doing homework.
9. How often do you complete your homework? *(Place a check in ONE box that best describes your answer and explain why you chose that answer on the lines below)*
 - a) ☐ I complete my homework all of the time or most of the time.
 - b) ☐ I complete my homework some of the time.
 - c) ☐ I usually do not complete my homework.
10. What class/subject do you like the most and why? Explain your answer.
11. How often do you complete your class work assignments? *Place a check in the box that best describes your answer and explain why you chose that answer on the lines provided.*
 - a) ☐ All of the time because _____
 - b) ☐ Most of the time because _____
 - c) ☐ I don't complete my class work because _____

12. How much time do you spend each day doing homework? *(Place a check in the box that best describes your answer)*

- a) ☐ 1 hour or less
- b) ☐ 2 to 4 hours
- c) ☐ 5 to 7 hours
- d) ☐ 8 hours or more

13. How much time do you spend each night reading aloud? *(Place a check in the box that best describes your answer)*

- a) ☐ At least 5 minutes a day
- b) ☐ 10 to 20 minutes a day
- c) ☐ 20 to 30 minutes a day
- d) ☐ I do not read aloud on a regular basis

14. How much time do you spend each night watching T.V. or playing video games?

- a) ☐ 15 minutes to 1 hour
- b) ☐ 1 to 3 hours
- c) ☐ 4 to 8 hours or longer
- d) ☐ I do not watch a lot of T.V. or spend a lot of time playing video games.

15. How much time do you spend each night on the computer (not doing school work)?

- a) ☐ 15 minutes to 1 hour
- b) ☐ 1 to 3 hours
- c) ☐ 4 to 8 hours
- d) ☐ I do not spend a lot of time on the computer unless I am doing school work.

16. In the space provided, list 5 things teachers can do to help you maintain or improve your overall academic performance in school?

17. Please circle one answer for each. DO NOT put your name on any part of the survey.

A) Gender *(circle one answer)*

- a. Male b. Female

B) Grade level *(circle one answer)*

- a. 2nd b. 3rd c. 4th d. 5th e. 6th

C) Race/ethnicity *(Circle one answer)*

a. African American (Black)

b. Caucasian (White)

c. Hispanic/Latino

d. Asian

e. Other _____

D) Age (*Circle one answer*)

a. 7 to 8 years of age

b. 9 to ten years of age

c. 11 to 12 years of age

d. Other _____